

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 434 750

PS 027 975

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TITLE Missing Opportunities or Improving Learning?
PUB DATE 1999-09-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) (9th, Helsinki, Finland, September 1-4, 1999).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beginning Reading; Childhood Needs; *Early Childhood Education; Elementary School Teachers; Foreign Countries; *Literacy Education; *National Curriculum; Preschool Teachers; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS England; Vignettes; Wales

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses recent educational policy developments in England and Wales, focusing on the National Literacy Strategy, National Numeracy Strategy, and the proposed Early Learning Goals. The paper delineates research findings regarding the early mathematics and English learning achieved before entry into formal schooling, effective teaching practices to support learning in the preschool years, and the knowledge that children bring to school. The paper further presents representative examples from data narratives to illustrate current practice in reception classes in England and Wales. Two narratives reveal that over the course of a year, there was a shift in the pedagogy for literacy from differentiated literacy group activities and hearing individual readers to a Literacy Hour format, with more guided or group reading taking place. In addition, the narratives reveal differences in the subject knowledge of teachers and in the extent to which they are clear and comfortable about how to teach literacy most effectively to the very youngest pupils. The paper maintains that knowledgeable and skilled teachers offer their classes rich literacy experiences that are both systematic and learner-centered through time-economic, focused, direct teaching. The paper notes that the discourse used in the proposed "Early Learning Goals" contrasts strongly with the Scottish Office Curriculum Framework 3-5, concluding that although early years teachers need to use the frameworks offered by the National Literacy Strategy and the Early Learning Goals to inform their planning, they must maintain their belief in what they know about the effective ways that young children learn best. (KB)

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**Paper for EEEECERA Conference
Helsinki 1-4 September, 1999**

Missing Opportunities or Improving Learning?

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Introduction : This discussion paper is developed from thoughts in progress on issues related to whether or not recent educational policy in England and Wales, runs counter to:

- what we know about the way that young children learn, and
- what we know to be the most effective ways of working with three to six year olds.

The specific developments I am referring to are the Government directives affecting the youngest pupils in England and Wales namely:

- the top-down pressure that the National Literacy Strategy and the National Numeracy Strategy exerts on the teaching practices of nursery and reception classteachers; and
- the QCA(1999) proposed 'Early Learning Goals'.

The starting point for the discussion is the, well-known quotation of Margaret Donaldson, referring to the work conducted over the last two decades into children's cognitive functioning. She says.

"...I think there is at least one belief that all of them (researchers) would share: the belief that children are highly efficient learners, competent inquirers, eager to understand.

More and more evidence keeps coming to support the view that it is true of human beings from the very earliest months of life. Children's minds are not at any stage - not ever- to be thought of as receptacles into which stuff called knowledge can be poured. Nor do children wait in a general way for us to prod them into learning. They wonder, they question, they try to make sense. And, not infrequently, when they direct their questions at us they push to the limit our ability to answer them, as every adult who has spoken much with children knows." (1989)

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Evidence about the nature of early learning

Mathematics and literacy are only two of the subject domains which demonstrate, very clearly, the impressive extent of the early learning that takes place during the pre-school years.

Key understandings in mathematics achieved by most children before formal schooling

Regarding mathematics and number in particular, amongst many concepts, children have to sort out two systems for which number is used by society, namely, non-quantitative uses of number such as bus numbers and telephone numbers and numbers used directly to denote quantity, such as age and numbers of sweets. The work of Cowan and Ewers-Rogers (1996) and Munn(1994) shows that by 3 and a half years children are well on the way to resolving this.

Key understandings in English achieved by most children before formal schooling

As with numeracy, there are huge conceptual issues to be grasped. Children have to understand the 'big ideas' of literacy that print is speech written down and that the marks are unchanging, and following on from that, is the awareness of the symbolic nature of the alphabetic code. A particular sound in a word can be represented by a specific letter or groups of letters. Here, too, there are two systems to unravel, children need to learn that words encode sounds as well as meaning. There are many researchers who have worked on this emergent literacy phase of literacy and Sulzby and Teale are but two.

What do we know about how this early learning takes place?

- 1] the child is an actively constructs understanding through interaction with the environment
- 2] the social interaction between experienced adults and children which supports the purposeful engagement with activities

Rogoff,1990 suggests it is the "...opportunities for guided participation that is a crucial process of cognitive development".

What do we know of the types of effective practice that most supports learning in the pre-school years?

The ways of working with young children that appear to be most effective are those that support the child in continuing to learn how to learn and which capitalise on the seemingly innate drive to understand and to make sense of their world. Iram Siraj-Blatchford (1999) summarises these for us as follows:

- Effective programs use explicitly stated, developmentally appropriate active-learning curricula that support children's self-initiated learning activities.
- Effective teaching staff have been trained in early childhood education and do not change jobs often.
- Effective administrators provide systematic in service training on site and supervisory support for their staff's curriculum implementation.
- Effective programs maintain classes of fewer than 20 three to five year-olds for every pair of teaching adults.
- Staff treat parents as partners and engage in extensive outreach with monthly visits to learn from parents and to help them to understand the curriculum and their child's development.

What do we know about the knowledge that children bring to school?

Two studies(Aubrey, 1993 and Riley,1994) that followed children through the first year of mainstream school show that school entrants arrive at school with rich stores of knowledge about numeracy and literacy respectively but it is highly idiosyncratic. Those teachers who facilitate the greatest progress in their pupils are those who:

- are knowledgeable in the subject,
- know the children well and thus are able to be diagnostic of their current understandings, and
- teach appropriately to this prior knowledge.

These statements re-affirm the principles listed above.

What is occurring in reception classes today?

This discussion is developed from many hours of observation of reception teachers in classes last year throughout 1997/98. The data were collected, by undertaking four case studies located within the extensive and comprehensive "Class-size project"(Blatchford, Mortimore and Goldstein).

What follows are representative examples from data narratives to give a flavour of current practice in reception classes. The vignettes are not cited here to imply that they are nationally representative or generalisable but merely to describe a snapshot of current practice observed and to explore some thoughts in progress. Six visits each were made to four reception classes of different sizes in one shire county LEA. The classes ranged from the smallest of 17 pupils to the largest of 32 pupils. All the schools admitted the children the term that they became five years old.

The observations were carried out by researchers all of whom are experienced early years teachers, currently teacher trainers and, in addition, one is an Ofsted inspector.

The observations focused on:

- the teachers' methods of organisation of her teaching,
- the way that additional adults were deployed to support learning,
- attempts were made to evaluate the quality of the children's learning through noting the length of time they were engaged with tasks,
- how long a target child received adult support with her learning,
- estimations were also made regarding whether the tasks were low/medium or high cognitive challenge, and
- the quality of the outcome of the activity or its product.

OBSERVATION SCHEDULE.

Organisation of teaching with a particular focus on literacy learning

During the year, across the four schools a shift was noted in the pedagogy for literacy, from differentiated literacy group activities and hearing individual readers to a Literacy Hour format. With the typical features of less individual children being heard read by adults and more 'guided' or group reading taking place. This would probably be even more true of the academic year, 1998/99.

Example 1

One morning's activities in a typical school day in Term 2 and Term 3 in a class of 25 reception children. The school is in a medium-sized town and built on a housing estate of owner-occupied, average priced houses.

9.12am Whole class work-sharing/ counting/discussion. Letterland practice(1 and half minutes). Child who comes in late has brought in a pot of jam for the teacher made by his mother. A short discussion follows of 'j' for jam and other words beginning with 'j'. Teacher then chats with c.a. about jam making(low level challenge activity).

9.22am Weather chart....decision about what the weather is like today...setting up of a windmill--singing of a weather song reinforcing names of the months. (medium challenge activity, 2/3 class involved)

9.27am Sorting Groups and their tasks with instructions.
 Orange gp.: Kite making with c.a. (med./high challenge))
 Blue gp:'Where am I?' child- written and constructed books (potentially high challenge)
 Yellow gp: Weather pattern sequencing strip. (medium challenge)
 Red gp: Concept Tree diagrams (low challenge)
 Green gp: Puzzles (low challenge)

One child gets out a trainset and plays with it and another goes to the music area to work!

9.35am All work is set up, teacher works with the Blue gp. on preposition work/supports spoken language into written language (high challenge activity).

9.37am Teacher views room/ encourages Red gp. by supporting identification and classification (high challenge) moves off.
 Whole class remains on task for 20 minutes at possibly medium challenge level.

10.00am Tidying up.

10.05 am All class on carpet....plenary on what has been done, 9/10 of class involved.

10.10am Assembly followed by break.

10.50am Whole class take part in 'shared reading' Dan the Flying Man is the text. After whole class joining in the reading of the book, individuals read a page at a time to all the group. Good practice for them and for those concentrating and following with the reader. Children then asked to identify rhyming words.....not much of a response so teacher offers " crane and rain" and then " trees and seas" A discussion about cranes follows.

10.57am Group work.....Yellow gp: read Dan the Flying Man with a set of multiple copies of books with Teacher (high challenge) .Green gp. look at books without adult. The rest have milk.

11.06am All children have silent (sort of!) reading...all engaged (medium challenge). Teacher changes reading books in home/school wallets in preparation of them being taken home.

11.20am The various groups do a repetition of the work planned for early am. but with a rotation of the different gps. Red gp. are now kite making, one of the target children with a very short

concentration span remains engaged for 20 minutes (at med/high challenge) the longest bout over 6 days of observing him.

11.25am Yellow gp. work with Teacher with the sentence maker (high challenge)

11.40am All are now finishing off activities.

11.50am Class plenary involving a discussion of kite making.

11.55am Class all sing the song 'A hedghog is very prickly' !

12.00pm Lunch

The field notes that were written following this session follow:

There was much that was well done this morning. Children operated with a rich array of activities and opportunities. The resources are well-designed and with clear learning intentions-the children are learning to concentrate and to become involved for substantial periods. However, activity changes happen frequently, interactions of the teacher with a group are short, with little sustained or genuinely scaffolded support. On occasions, this was due not so much to management of time pressure but to her rather shallow subject knowledge. The rhyming word instance was one example, quite why she chose the words she did remain a mystery as the book offered more obvious teaching opportunities of rhymes that were both auditory and visual, such as Dan/man/can/ ran. A missed opportunity was not fully capitalising on the present of the pot of jam discussion of how jam is made, sequencing the stages of its making, and writing the word letter by letter, sounding them out, drawing children's attention to the way it is spelt and then generating a few rhyming words for the children to see how by simply changing the first letter more words are made, e.g. dam/ram/jam/clam/spam/tam/pam with the am patterns of letters emphasised with an underline or with colour.

The longest bout of high cognitive challenge experienced by an individual child was 20 minutes in this typical morning, most children when they were engaged with tasks, it was at no higher than medium level. Group work offered more opportunity for effective and higher level engagement and learning than the whole class sessions which proved hard to involve the pupils for more than a few minutes. Children were grouped in approximate ability groups but the tasks were rotated around all the groups without adaptation.

EXAMPLE 2

Here is description of another typical morning's work in a different school, a few miles away, in a larger town but with a population of

pupils of approximately the same socio-economic status as the previous example. This time there are 32 reception children.

The children are grouped according to ability for literacy with 4-7 in each group and 5-6 groups.

The children arrive at 8.50am and settle immediately to pre-arranged activities, they are directed to specific work by a name card on a lollipop stick. The teacher endeavours to have a parent as well as a classroom assistant in these sessions. All three adults have a list of children they are to work with and each work with two groups during the hour. The children are ability grouped. The teacher conducts 'Shared Reading' with an enlarged text with each group in rotation, throughout the week. She believes that the class are too young and too disparate in reading ability for whole class 'big book' sessions to be of great value.

The activities set up were:

1. Story sequencing (most able gp of 7)

Jack and the Beanstalk pictures to colour/cut and sequence. Captions to write. The activity offered some low challenge colouring but high challenge caption writing good quality work was produced. Teacher started the group off and then they were supported by the parent.

2. Playdough words (a middle ability gp of 6)

Words of the week (it, in, is) to be made from the dough. Flashcards words and letter cutters are available for children. This was a low challenge activity with the outcome unchecked. They worked independently.

3. Letter identification and Sound game (less able gp of 4)

Class assistant started this group off on the game and after 15 minutes children from the computer were invited over to play. Medium to high challenge activity designed by teacher and greatly enjoyed.

4. Weather diaries (2nd highest ability gp)

The task was to draw a picture of the day's weather and to write a sentence about it using flash cards from the weather board, a medium challenge activity. This was an independent activity with variable results.

5. Teacher's group (Younger gp. of 4 less able children)

Direct instruction on week's words (it, in, is) using flash cards and magnetic letters. Children wrote letters on the white board and made words with magnetic letters. Then a 'big book' session followed joined by other children. Teacher instructed on words, sounds and concepts about print her attention focused on the original group but including all the nine. High challenge activity with good outcomes especially for the original target group.

6.Computers

On each of the two computers there were two children working with the Animated Alphabet programme.....low or medium challenge.

Most children completed two activities in the hour, and remained literacy focused for the entire time. The activities were well-differentiated for the range of abilities of the children. Some also had time for free choice activities also after the two main tasks were completed.

Field notes written after the morning's observation:

This teacher is hard working and gifted. She designed relevant, challenging activities that were closely matched to the different group's literacy stages. Although she had 7 more children in the class than the teacher in Example 1, the opportunities she offered the pupils were by no means of lower quality. Her excellent organisational skills and judicious deployment of additional adult help, enabled the children to remain engaged with tasks for longer periods of time, 20/30 minutes typically.

The National Literacy Strategy and The Early Learning Goals ---- do they offer a threat or opportunity to the quality of teaching and learning of these reception children?

The teaching approaches suggested by the National Literacy Strategy

The NLS was beginning to have an effect on the teaching approaches for literacy employed by these reception class teachers. 'Shared Reading' was becoming more common as was 'Guided Reading'. In the first example, we saw a typical whole class session, the children practised their reading supported by the repetition of the known text and their peer group in choral reading, however, the word level work was of poor quality which did not capitalise sufficiently on the opportunities offered by the text.

In order to engage 25 five year olds with an 'enlarged text' story followed by valuable direct teaching with a focused reading 'lesson' certain features need to be present and if it is to fulfil the criteria, stated earlier, believed the pre-requisite for effective early years practice.

Sylva, Hurry, Mirelman, Burrell and Riley (1999) identified those features from an evaluation of the LIFT project, a prototype of the Literacy Hour, operating in the London Borough of Westminster. The main features of this successful initiative are:

- extensive inservice for the classteachers improving their subject knowledge,
- a gradual and supported implementation of the teaching approaches,
- understanding of the literacy development of the children by frequent use of running reading records, and
- rigorous training of the classroom assistants.

In the Westminster reception classrooms the work was focused and appropriate, it was also well-paced. In Example 1, probably due to insufficient inservice training, the teacher was uncertain about her teaching objectives and therefore consequently hazy on the learning opportunities the text might offer. So, perhaps, it is not the suggested mode of pedagogy of the NLS, that poses a threat to nursery and reception children being taught literacy in the most valuable way but the level of subject knowledge of the teachers and the extent to which they are clear and comfortable about how to teach literacy most effectively to the very youngest pupils. 'Shared Reading' can be (as was seen in the LIFT project) a very time-economic way of focusing several children's attention on reading a text which also provides the basis for specific teaching of literacy, but it needs skill and flair to match the instruction appropriately to the children's stage of literacy development. In Example 2, we saw a teacher knowledgeable about literacy and the progress individuals were making, she is skilful at developing interesting, differentiated and engaging activities for the groups to work in a sustained manner supported by informed adults.

A study in the United States (Dahl, Scharer and Lawson, 1999) investigating effective ways to teach word level skills in early years classes would corroborate that literacy learning is too complex for learning to be achieved in situations that are not relate to a context with which the child can, both, engage and be 'scaffolded' into developing her own understandings. Dahl et al say "With both individual and group contexts, teachers based phonics lessons on the developmental patterns of students rather than the next skill in the teachers'manual.....The combination of both skills

and strategies is particularly important in light of evidence that phonics skills may be insufficient support for young readers and writers without an understanding of how to apply such information to decode and encode unfamiliar words' (1999,p.23).

This needs to be borne in mind when planning a Literacy Hour with its various activities. It seems that early years teachers are right to be wary about this initiative which appears to advise them against working in the way that it is known that young children learn best, however, these case studies have indicated that the picture is neither black nor white. Some teachers are, as I suspect they always have, missing opportunities. But, knowledgeable and skilled teachers are offering their classes rich literacy experiences which are both systematic and learner-centred through time-economic, focused, direct teaching. They are organising imaginatively adult support active learning opportunities.

The proposed 'Early Learning Goals'

The discourse used in this document is one of instruction and teaching. For example----

'They [the children] need well trained and qualified practitioners, who plan the curriculum with clear learning intentions, and use proven and effective teaching strategies. Both direct teaching and carefully planned play and activity make a significant contribution to children's learning in these years.'

..... and

" The purpose of these goals is to:

- establish expectations for the majority of children by the end of the reception year;"

This contrasts strongly with the Scottish Office (1999) Curriculum Framework 3-5 which says, firmly and clearly:

" Young children come to early years settings as active, experienced learners with a natural curiosity.They are unique individuals eager to make sense of their world, to develop relationships and to extend their skills."

Early years teachers need to take the frameworks offered by National Literacy Strategy and the Early Learning Goals in order to

inform their planning, in terms of continuity and progression but they must hold onto the belief in what they know about the effective ways that young children learn best and above all it must be remembered that-

"Children's minds are not at any stage - not ever- to be thought of as receptacles into which stuff called knowledge can be poured"(Donaldson,1989).

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Jeni Riley thanks Dr Peter Blatchford for allowing her to quote from the case study data collected within the parent study the "Class-size Project"(Blatchford,Mortimore and Goldstein)

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